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Ballad of the Little Soldier: Werner Herzog in a Political Hall of Mirrors

In 1981–1982 soldiers of the revolutionary Sandinista government of Nicaragua evacuated and burned a number of Miskito Indian villages along Nicaragua's border with Honduras. Most of the inhabitants were forcibly resettled in camps, but several thousand chose refuge across the Rio Coco in Honduras.

Filmed in northeastern Nicaragua and southeastern Honduras, *Ballad of the Little Soldier* is a 45-minute documentary about the Miskito Indians and their rebellion against the Sandinistas. Co-directed by Werner Herzog and French-German journalist Denis Reichle, the film has become a controversial element in the propaganda struggle between the Sandinistas and the US-backed Contra rebel groups fighting to overthrow them. At the center of the controversy is the Sandinista accusation that *Ballad of the Little Soldier* is damaging to their cause because it can be exploited by their enemies—the Contras and the CIA. Herzog has countered that he is not against the Sandinistas, but simply for the Miskitos.

The film does contain interviews with Miskitos which tell of widespread Sandinista abuses—including torture and massacres, and the material is unquestionably damaging to the government of Nicaragua. Although these atrocity stories are an important part of the film, their purpose is to provide a backdrop to the film's main theme, the story of ten-to-fourteen-year-old Miskito boys being trained to fight in the Misura army against the Sandinistas. Critics of the film have concentrated on defending the reputation of the Sandinistas, and have ignored the very disturbing but genuine contributions of Herzog and Reichle to the documentary genre.

Dr. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, publisher and editor of *Indigenous World* and a specialist

on Miskito Indian issues, is among the film's most outspoken opponents. In April, 1985, she appeared at nearly every screening of the film during a week-long run in San Francisco. In a leaflet she distributed at the screenings, Ortiz writes that "Herzog's romanticism about Indians, actually a form of racism, has transformed one of the brilliant living film-makers into an opportunistic lackey for the CIA." The accusation is only one of many through which Ortiz attempts to discredit Herzog, Reichle, and most of the people appearing in the film (see box).

A few minutes into *Ballad of the Little Soldier* there is a series of interviews in which people describe how Sandinista soldiers treated them. Herzog provides the English translation in his own voice. A 15-year-old girl dressed in combat fatigues and carrying a rifle shows the camera where her house once stood. The place, Herzog explains, is the former site of one of 60 villages burned by the Sandinistas along the Rio Coco. A 40-year-old man, who has since joined the Misura rebel army, then describes the day the Sandinista army came to his town. He stands next to a corner post jutting up from the dense undergrowth—all that remains of his house.

"People started running away, and the ones who were caught were killed. The others were shot at as they tried to escape. Children were hit. The soldiers tied up their prisoners and then beheaded them or shot them. They had left the corpses tied to the stakes. They were still there days later, decaying. Women were among them. Bombs were dropped from a helicopter. Everything was razed to the ground . . ."

As the man tells the story he goes into a frenzy, racing from one tree stump to the next, bending his head sideways and striking

During the week that *Ballad of the Little Soldier* premiered at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco, a peculiar skirmish in the propaganda war that shadows the real war in Nicaragua was played out in the American press.

In April, 1985, *Newsweek* published a series of color photographs showing a man digging his own grave and getting into it. In the last shot a khaki-clad figure leans over the victim and slits his throat. The captions stated that the pictures showed Contra soldiers executing a Sandinista informant they had captured on a raid into Nicaragua. The young American photographer who had sent the stills to *Newsweek* icily added that the execution, in his opinion, was necessary—because the informant would have given away the position of the Contras had they let him go.

Almost immediately, the US State Department issued a denunciation of the shots as fakes, calling them a not-too-clever attempt at disinformation. To support the claim, the State Department pointed out that the uniform worn by the "Contra" soldier shown cutting the informant's throat was no longer in use among *real* Contra troops. The implication was that the pictures and the story had been fabricated by Sandinista sympathizers.

A similar political *Rashomon* story has surrounded *Ballad of the Little Soldier* since it was first aired on German television late in 1984. Dr. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, the film's most virulent self-appointed opponent, is a professor of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Hayward, and a member of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, "a United Nations consultative non-governmental organization which focuses on Indians in Central America, particularly the Miskitos." Ortiz denounced the film, the people in it, and Werner Herzog in a flurry of accusations so wild they demanded follow-up investigation. The substance of her charges make Herzog out to be something between a malicious racist liar and a blundering romantic fool victimized by the CIA in an elaborate con game. To help me sort it all out, Ortiz invited me to interview her at her San Francisco apartment.

On the appointed day I was driving to meet

with Ortiz when a pickup truck pulled up next to me at a stop light. The young Latin driver sported a military crewcut and wore a well-pressed camouflage shirt. As we waited at the light he held up a copy of *Newsweek* opened to the pictures of the man having his throat cut. He held the magazine out the window and pointed at the photos with his other hand.

"Communist sons of bitches," he yelled at me, smiling.

I asked him where he was from. "Managua," he answered.

While the incident was unnerving, the interview with Roxanne Ortiz proved even more so (see text of story). Well-versed in the arcane history of Sandinista-Miskito relations, Ortiz spends a good portion of her time in Nicaragua. In 1984 she contributed to a *CoEvolution Quarterly* investigation of the Miskito controversy. While claiming to represent indigenous Indian interests, Ortiz is a staunch supporter of the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. She is quick to level charges against anyone who questions the behavior of that government. In the same issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly* (Fall 1984) that Ortiz contributed to, Bernard Nietschmann, himself a controversial figure in the Miskito-Sandinista debates, all but accused Ortiz of being a paid Sandinista agent. He wrote that she paid \$30,000 out of her own pocket for a *New York Times* ad condemning Nietschmann's testimony on Sandinista mistreatment of the Miskitos before the Organization of American States. During our interview, Ortiz admitted participating in the evacuation of the Miskitos from their villages along the Rio Coco. Her version of what happened differs considerably from the accounts in *Ballad of the Little Soldier* and she maintains that the film contains numerous falsehoods.

Ortiz wrote Herzog, listing her charges; and he wrote back, categorically denying each item. Ortiz, however, has continued to repeat the same charges. Frustrated by the disparities, I gathered a list of claims made by Ortiz during our interview and wrote Herzog. He responded by letter to each point, and added a description of his experiences in Nicaragua as a guest of the Sandinistas, much of which is in the story.

—G.C.

at his own neck with the edge of his hand to simulate machete blows on the necks of victims.

"It is hard to believe that the Sandinistas could truly have wanted what happened," says Herzog, prefacing this account. Afterwards he speculates on possible reasons for the atrocities:

"The Sandinista explanation was that it was a military necessity. Probably the Sandinistas wanted to rapidly advance the Miskitos into modern forms of socialism. That meant having to destroy the old village structures."

Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz insists that the people in these interviews are liars. She claims that Herzog interviewed only members of a cacique class who had previously oppressed the Miskitos, and were deposed by the Sandinistas. She describes the man who so dramatically depicted the massacre on the Rio Coco as "one of the most hated people among the Miskitos themselves—a brutal person."

Ortiz claims no one was killed during the evacuation and destruction of the Miskito villages on the Rio Coco. As she talks about the operations, it becomes obvious that she participated on the Sandinista side.

"I was helping some people move," she admits. "People didn't object to being moved. They were begging to be allowed to go somewhere."

When asked why the villages were burned, Ortiz says, "It would have been ridiculous to remove the people living there without burning the villages. The two were totally together. The decision about evacuation always included the burning of the villages." It sounds curiously like the explanation given a TV newsman by a US Marine in the act of torching a Vietnamese village. "We had to destroy it to save it," said the Marine.

When the comparison was pointed out to her, Ortiz tried to sugar-coat the burning of the Miskito villages. "It wasn't done in any vindictive or violent way," said Ortiz. "I was there when villages were burned."

While the atrocity testimonials are important for establishing the reasons behind Miskito disaffection with the Sandinista revolution, the central focus of *Ballad of the Little Soldier* is on the military activities of the Misura guerrillas. For Herzog, the story of an Indian insurrection resonates with ideas and emotions



Herzog filming *BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER*

he has previously explored in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, with one major difference.

In the earlier films Herzog always told the story from the point of view of the Europeans, who were outsiders attempting to impose their sense of order on the uncooperative jungle. He stuck with them as the intruders were gradually defeated and swallowed up by a vicious, chaotic state of nature. In *Ballad of the Little Soldier* Herzog's camera is finally on the other side of that story, with the Indians—where he has always longed to be. He accompanies Miskito Indian commandos on a raid, and marches triumphantly with them into a "liberated" village.

Herzog owes much of this intimate access to the Miskito side of a nasty civil war to Denis Reichle, his co-director. The collaboration between them has a far more elaborate function in the film than that of film-maker-guide/researcher. Reichle's role is, in fact, a dominant theme that remains concealed until near the end when Reichle emerges as a central character, being himself a historical link to the boy soldiers in the film. But until that dramatic coup is delivered, Herzog and Reichle switch back and forth between atrocity stories and lushly photographed scenes that could easily be part of an adventure epic.

Ballad of the Little Soldier opens with a close-up of a young boy, ten to twelve years old, dressed in combat fatigues, listening to a Spanish song on a cassette player. When the shot ends, Herzog's voice explains that the film crew had to spend weeks traversing the jungle behind enemy lines to reach the village in Nicaragua where some of the scenes were filmed. He then provides a summary of Miskito history.

"The Miskitos have always been badly treated . . . Somoza's soldiers plundered their villages . . . Today, because of the failure of the Sandinistas to deal with them any better, many of the Miskitos are fighting the new rulers of the country. The Indians have no illusions; they know they will always have to defend themselves, regardless of who eventually succeeds the Sandinistas."

Cut to a scene of commandos crossing a river in a power boat. The armed men are tense and silent as the boat nears the opposite shore. Then we hear the sound of shots, and the commandos scatter on the beach. Herzog excitedly narrates that this is a raid across the Rio Coco from Honduras into Nicaragua. Ortiz, however, has charged that Herzog was not present when the scene was shot, and that the location is not on the Rio Coco. She believes that the scene is an exercise filmed somewhere else. Herzog has repeatedly denied all of these allegations.

Because the raiding party has been discovered, they spend days slogging through jungle swamps before being turned back—mission unaccomplished—by the lack of drinking water. Herzog's dry narration punches up the futility of the operation.

The most blatantly romantic scene in the film begins with a wide shot of a ragtag group of Misura soldiers, some mounted on small horses, entering a village. The camera cuts to villagers warily eyeing the troops as Herzog describes their inherent mistrust of soldiers—any soldiers—until they learn that "these are their soldiers." The villagers are then shown linking hands with the troops and welcoming them in song.

Once a sense of unity between the Misura army and the Miskito villagers has been established, the film moves on through the detailed atrocity stories. Some were shot in Nicaragua, others in the refugee camps of Honduras, but all of these horror stories are building blocks meant to support the key sequences filmed at the training camp where Miskito boys are being readied for battle by a Drill Instructor (DI) who was formerly a member of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard.

One ten-year-old soldier says that he has joined the Misura forces because he saw the Sandinistas kill his two younger brothers "just for fun." Most of the children inter-

viewed want to kill Sandinistas to avenge their kin. The dedicated young DI explains in very poor English that the children would have been drafted had they remained in Nicaragua—but by the Sandinistas. He declares his total confidence in the boy soldiers, claiming that when sent into battle such young soldiers have fought more valiantly than adults.

As the DI explains the advantages of turning children into soldiers, Denis Reichle gradually works his way into the film. He has been shown only once before, during the scene of the commandos crossing the river.

"The mind is not corrupt yet, so we can prepare him and train him to be a professional soldier against the communists," says the DI.

"You think he knows what is communist?" Reichle asks the DI in English.

"All of them know the situation that our people are living in: why he had to run, and his mother and dad has died. He know why . . . what communism means."

Reichle presses the point. "Can you ask him?"

As the DI asks the boy in Spanish, Herzog translates into English, saying that the boy answers Reichle's question with the words, "They are puny runts." Herzog's voice expresses satisfaction that Reichle has scored a kind of victory point over the DI. It is the beginning of a major shift in the direction of a film that is nearly over.

The DI continues to expound on why the boys make excellent soldiers. "This is the best age because their minds are clean, their minds are free to take in the training that you are giving them, and . . ."

"That means you can brainwash them," interrupts Reichle.

"Yes," answers the DI. "You can brainwash them . . ." Another point has been scored over the hapless DI, who is clearly not up on the connotations of brainwashing in the English-speaking world. He has been trapped by Reichle in an ambush captured on film. But why? Are not Reichle and Herzog sympathetic to the Miskito cause? The answer, which is also the answer to the question of why this film is being made, remains concealed for yet another minute.

The DI begins to deliver a passionate patriotic speech to the young troops assembled on the parade ground. He embellishes the speech

*Drill
instructor
and
young
Miskito
soldiers*



with the words, “We are assembled here in *Nicaragua* . . .” which Herzog instantly contradicts in an editorial aside, confiding that the camp is actually in Honduras, and that the DI has lied for the benefit of the camera. Herzog’s remark is a way of telling his audience: “You see, in the interest of heightened dramatic values I could have corroborated the DI’s lie, but instead, I exposed it.” The technique is designed to hold the audience’s trust in Werner Herzog’s integrity, a trust that Herzog seems aware is to be severely tested by this film. The exposure of the DI’s dishonesty is also a way to prepare for the film’s most climactic moment. By purifying the atmosphere of falsehood, Herzog and Reichle can now proceed to unburden themselves of a terrible dark determinism rooted in the German experience of the Second World War.

The Drill Instructor’s speech is followed by silence. Denis Reichle walks down a row of boys standing in formation dressed in full battle gear. The camera follows him from a low angle, showing that none of the boys even come up to his shoulders. Reichle asks a boy if he isn’t afraid to die? The boy answers that he is not.

Reichle continues to address the camera in English. The children around him stand perfectly still, as if Reichle were not even there.

The dim light of early morning adds to the gloom that Reichle begins to radiate. The effect is of a towering grey chimerical figure draping these boy soldiers with the shadow of his foreboding, as if the reaper himself hovered over this army of children, casting a shroud that only the camera sees. But Denis Reichle’s shroud is one that he has worn for forty years. It was woven when Reichle was himself a soldier at the end of World War II.

The whole film, it now becomes clear, has been orchestrated to set up this final revelation by Reichle. His words draw a historical parallel between two very specific battlefields that by extension become all modern battlefields. The words also reveal why both Herzog and Reichle became interested in the Miskito child-soldiers. Reichle sees himself in these boys. Their experiences resonate with his own experiences in World War II, when the German army was so desperate for manpower that it drafted 15-year-olds, and finally, near the very end, even 14-year-olds. Denis Reichle, it seems, was one of them.

As Reichle surveys the Miskito boys, and tells his story to the camera in English, the uniformed children he is talking about do not understand a word. “It reminds me of a very sad story, when I myself was fourteen and was involved in Berlin and Germany in the last

hours of the last weeks of the fight against the Russians—and we believed it was to save the country. And many of us stayed there and died . . .

“It’s a very sad moment what I see now. It reminds me too much of my childhood. In the age of thirteen, fourteen, if somebody tells you you’re a man and you’ve got to fight for the country, you automatically believe it and you go. And that’s what I see here again. It happened to us forty years ago; and it happens around the world—all over—every time. I can’t put out of my mind when I see all these kids, that for me, I see them practically dead.”

The film ends with a group of Miskito boys singing a song in Spanish. As the camera studies each one’s face the song becomes a dirge sung by the already dead boy soldiers Reichle has summoned forth to escort these Miskito children to their graves.

Although Reichle consciously compares the Miskito boy soldiers of 1984 in Honduras with their German predecessors of 1945 in Berlin, he stops short with a melancholy statement about the sadness of it all. His sorrow, evoked by his foreknowledge of impending tragedy, is classical. For Reichle, the Miskito boys are doomed by the completion of a mystical circle they themselves will never be able to perceive.

The comparison between the two groups of doomed children touches on yet another theme. Reichle overtly complains about the psychological manipulation of the children, but when he generalizes and says that this has happened “around the world—all over—every time,” it is a reference to the ontology of lost causes and predetermined outcomes, blurring the specific case of the Miskitos to make a bigger point. Not only are the Miskito boys fighting in the Nicaraguan civil war and the German boys who fought in WWII doomed, but all boys who have fought for all desperate lost causes throughout history share this doom.

The motif of boy soldiers sacrificing themselves for a lost cause has been effectively used in many films. In *The Bridge* (1959) Bernhard Wicki dedicated a whole film to the subject of German boys thrown into combat in WWII. One of the most spectacular scenes in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) depicts the suicide charge of a White Russian cadet regiment. Several American films about the Civil War

have shown similar scenes of Confederate cadets attacking Union forces and suffering heavy casualties.

In *Ballad of the Little Soldier* the broader identification of the Miskito cause with that of Germany in World War II increases the odds against the children, thereby cementing their doom. Reichle’s knowledge of this inevitable outcome gives the film a special German quality which has been meticulously described by Saul Friedländer in *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). Friedländer attacks the resurgence of Nazi themes in numerous films, including works by Fassbinder, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and Liliana Cavani. One section is devoted to the evolution of a romantic motif particularly appealing to the Nazis: the cult of the young hero sacrificing himself for his country in the full bloom of innocence. Friedländer shows how this cult became an obsessive theme in films, songs, political rallies, and literature, until it finally became a reality.

“For the Nazis, this motif of death takes on a special dimension—urgent, essential, in some ways religious, mythical. This is an attraction for death in itself, as something elemental, opaque, intractable to analysis.” (p. 42)

Taking a second look at the scene of Denis Reichle surveying the rows of Miskito boys standing in formation, one is reminded of another scene, shot during the spring of 1945 by a German news cameraman. The sequence was filmed to bolster the flagging spirits of a German nation on the verge of defeat. It was intended for newsreels, but has lived on to appear in several films and television programs about the Third Reich and WWII. It shows Adolf Hitler reviewing a row of child-soldiers who have distinguished themselves in battle.

Hitler walks along in his greatcoat. He asks questions. When one of the boys tells him how many Russian tanks he has destroyed, Hitler pins a medal to his chest, chuckling. He playfully, paternally slaps another boy on the cheek when the boy tells him that he is fourteen. Because the footage has appeared in so many documentaries, it is likely that either Herzog or Reichle, or both of them, are familiar with it.

In the best tradition of propaganda films,

the scene uses Hitler's paternal joviality to convey a voyeuristic fascination with the heroic feats and courage of the boys. It could easily be an item in Ripley's *Believe it or Not* series, or in a more recent American television series. "He knocked out six tanks—and he was only fourteen: *That's Incredible*." Hitler's good humor in the scene successfully defuses the dark side of what is taking place, temporarily concealing the desperation that led to the drafting of the children. The magic of film transforms Hitler, the ogre actually consuming these children, into a proud father.

In the Honduran jungle, Denis Reichle plays out the same scene, but by concentrating on exactly those elements that Hitler so successfully downplayed in the film shot forty years earlier, Reichle draws attention to the horror of brainwashing young boys and sending them to their deaths. In a sense, he is Anti-Hitler come to atone in Central America for the sins of another war.

The hero's death cult is not the sole motif to surface in *Ballad of the Little Soldier* only to be demolished. The atrocity testimonials of war victims is another theme treated with far greater subtlety than in most documentaries.

Documentary audiences have become accustomed to seeing the victims of war describing horrible events. The atrocity testimonial is a staple of television news and documentary films to the extent that it is easy to see it coming and to accept it as part of the ritual that goes with watching documentaries—thereby tuning it out.

The atrocity testimonial interview has resurfaced with a vengeance in recent years, often becoming the backbone of documentaries about the various wars in Central America. The testimonial scenes in *Ballad of the Little Soldier* are not that different from those in other films—they generate sympathy for the victims of violence in the same ways. Herzog and Reichle use these interviews to show why the Misura army is able to recruit young boys. But then they undermine the thrust of their own material. Rather than making a blanket endorsement of the Misura army's actions and tactics, Herzog and Reichle instead stop to study the tragedy of the boy soldiers. It is an unprecedented act of sabotage for the documentary genre. The film-makers are obviously sympathetic to the plight of the Miskitos, believing that they have suffered

terribly, but simply cannot bring themselves to endorse the military activity being shown. But if they are not trying to support the Miskito army in its war against the Sandinistas, as Ortiz charges, what are they doing?

Reichle's final words about the children being "practically dead" again contain the answer. The documentary is meant to make a more universal statement about archetypes and recurring tragedy. For Werner Herzog the Miskito struggle plays into two powerful archetypal images, both with long histories in western art.

The Biblical "Slaughter of the Innocents" has been a constantly recurring theme in European painting. It connotes helplessness in the face of pointless massacre. What could be closer to the children "shot just for fun," or to the people tied to a palm tree and decapitated with machetes? The only image with equal power in the arts is the depiction of the Indian Massacre.

In the iconography of the Americas, the Indian Massacre has in fact replaced the Slaughter of the Innocents. It is an essential outcome of every Indian insurrection recorded since the days of Bartolomé De Las Casas (1474–1566), the first European champion of Indian causes. Without the Indian Massacre there would be no melancholy to the works of James Fenimore Cooper, or to a thousand movies about the conquest of the Americas, most recently *Little Big Man*. Herzog has dealt with Indian insurrections before, in both *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*. He clearly regards the Miskitos as perennial victims of oppression, saying as much in his narration when he states that they know they will have to defend themselves regardless of who eventually succeeds the Sandinistas.

The Central American wars have yielded dozens of documentaries by foreign film-makers. In the best of the genre the film crew accompanies guerrillas, showing their lifestyles as well as some military action. They are often highly subjective and personally involving films that rarely attempt to feign objectivity—the result of a bond formed between the people being filmed and the film-makers, an intimacy bred of sharing danger.

Many of these films are really action-adventure pictures. The audience is keenly aware of the great risks taken by the film-makers. One

of the best examples of the genre is *In the Name of the People*, a 75-minute film by a team of Californians nominated for an Academy Award in 1985. It was shot largely by the late John Chapman, who made an avocation of courting danger from the moment he first began shooting 8mm film behind the lines during the Nicaraguan revolution in 1978. *In the Name of the People* is a sympathetic portrait of guerrillas in El Salvador. It contains numerous interviews, a revolutionary marriage ritual, meals and songs in camp, marches through the jungle, testimonials to the brutality of the Salvadoran army, and a riveting combat sequence. The guerrillas are innovative and well-organized. They are also humane, spirited, fearless, and fighting a just war. Their enemies are evil.

The film-makers identify with the guerrillas and want us to like them. Ideology and propaganda statements are conveyed literally, without analysis. There is never a sour note. The good guys look too good.

In marked contrast, *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, while sympathizing with the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, portrays the boy soldiers of the Misura army with gloomy pessimism. A commando raid disintegrates into a futile ordeal. Even when things could be dressed up, Herzog the film-maker intrudes on what the camera and tape recorder would present as factual to inform us that we are being deceived. The moment raises important questions about other films in which similar scenes may be presented at face value. Herzog could have allowed the DI's lie to pass unchallenged, but by exposing it he exposes the potential for documentary film to distort and deceive, striking a blow at an enormous weakness in a highly revered genre. This act, along with Reichle's concluding monologue, add dimensions that effectively block the possibility of any utopistic socialist vision of the future, laying the groundwork for a much darker vision. There is no imminent victory looming on the horizon, just death and an endless cycle of more death.

The real protagonist of *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, as in nearly all war documentaries, is the documentary film-maker. This film, like so many other Herzog films, is a narrative account of the film-makers' ordeal/adventure. The actual places, characters, and stories told

are secondary to the fact that the documentarians were there, took the risks, and returned with the film as proof. Herzog has done this before, but by drawing attention to the process, as he does in *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, he implies that all such documentaries are first of all films about the experiences and conceptualizations of the film-maker. They are all home movies shot amidst exotic circumstances. As records of the film-maker's adventure, documentaries differ very little from fiction films.

In this context, *Ballad of the Little Soldier* is an anti-documentary, a violent guerrilla raid on the integrity of propaganda and news documentaries. With no program to support and no hope offered, the film is a nihilistic work threatening to all political sides and offering solace to none.

After hearing about *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, the Sandinista government invited Herzog to Nicaragua "to have a look at the Miskito problem from their side. I had the guarantee to go anywhere anytime without Sandinista forces around me," writes Herzog.* He accepted the invitation from Sergio Ramirez and Ernesto Cardenal, and took a print of the film with him.

"After the screening in Managua there was a very heated controversy (yet very respectful in tone) about the film, with . . . claims that all witnesses were paid imposters, but I believe that nobody really meant that seriously; the embarrassment seemed to be too deep. Ernesto Cardenal, for example, admitted that the Sandinistas committed 'grave and dramatical mistakes' in the treatment of the Miskitos. The controversy focused more on the question, who might use the film for which purposes? I was told that the film was against the people of Nicaragua.

"There was no reconciliation in our viewpoints, but I am impressed how kind and civilized the Sandinistas treated me. In Argentina, a few years ago, I would have disappeared within hours."

While he was a guest of the Sandinistas Herzog travelled to the coast and tried to go back to the town of Haulover where he had shot scenes of the Misura army entering the village.

*Letter to George Csicsery by Werner Herzog (6/85).



"I asked to go there," he writes. "Out of coincidence, there was an attack by Misura forces on government troops just before I arrived. That gives me to think that the very moment the first soldier of the Sandinista government set his foot on the beach of Haulover, all 800 inhabitants fled into the jungle . . . And this is the same village I have seen together with Misura soldiers, where the people greeted them with songs, sympathy and confidence. This alone tells clearly enough that there must be something wrong about the government troops."

In the same letter Herzog takes a much more forgiving attitude than one would expect after seeing the film.

"It is my firm belief, based on first-hand observation, that most of the government soldiers are badly trained, badly equipped, in panic, and most of the time not really under military control and discipline. That does not mean that I am against the Sandinistas. Looking at the history of Nicaragua and looking

at the needs and hopes of the people, one must be out of his mind if he does not see and feel the achievements of the Sandinista movement. I simply am not blind in the other eye."

The concluding statement in Herzog's letter reaffirms the metapolitical stance taken in *Ballad of the Little Soldier*. It is consistent with Herzog's statement that from the Miskito point of view the Sandinistas are a transient power, one of many in a long procession of governments which have ruled Nicaragua. "I hesitate to say too much about politics, about history, about ideology, about spheres of power, and zones of influence. My film is not a film against the Sandinistas, or anyone; it is a film with and for the Miskitos, and they have a voice in it."

Ballad of the Little Soldier (Ballade von kleinen Soldaten) (1984)

Directed by Werner Herzog and Denis Reichle; written by Herzog; cameramen Jorge Vignati and Michael Edols; edited by Maximiliane Mainka; produced by Werner Herzog Filmproduktion. 45 minutes.